

Memories of Mulgrave Street

THE HOUSE where Kate O'Brien was born is red-brick and detached, with a pear tree in the back garden visible from the road, and a small cut-stone heraldic device over the side archway. It is called Boru House and for me, as a child, it was one of two places of curiosity on the otherwise unremarkable Mulgrave Street, Limerick's gateway to the Waterford and old Cork roads. The other was the grey, intimidating Mental Hospital, directly opposite Boru House, a gloomy sprawling building forever in the shadows of monstrous chestnut trees; behind it a kitchen orchard full of luscious promise where we crept on summer evenings with hearts thumping loud, our little bodies like cocked triggers at the swishing approach of a vigilant male nurse.

by David Hanly

buildings that make up the greater part of one side; beginning at John O'Grady's Monument, we have a cemetery - St. Lawrence's - housing the remains of 50,000 Limerick people, full for years but still called The New Burying Ground by the grandparent generation; then the mental hospital, and finally Limerick Gaol. Swift would have approved of a main street inhabited on one side by the bad, the mad and the dead and on the other by a mixum-gatherum of social climbers, shopkeepers and the fairly well-off, for whom the phrase "crossing the street" might have had a rather distasteful ring.

But I shouldn't give the impression that the street was a doomed, awful place; its three sanctuaries don't intrude their peculiarities; they are withdrawn and rather silent, and for the eighteen years which I spent close to them, passing half-a-dozen times each day, I cannot remember being overwhelmed by their presence. Even now, when I return, I am grateful that the human condition will ensure the continuance of these landmarks in my memory.

That part of Limerick in which I spent a fairly circumscribed early life is willy-nilly a place of happy memories, if only because time imposes limits on one's remembrances and one naturally selects the days of sunshine and happiness as the only ones worth holding. Kate O'Brien's time and mine are more than a generation apart, but it was always interesting to hear her speak of a district and people that shaped us both.



Molly Ryan's Bar and the old houses of the Pike.

This was more than twenty years ago, long, long after Kate O'Brien had left for U.C.D. and fame, but the area had not yet suffered the shock of burgeoning suburbia and I doubt whether Miss O'Brien's image of the place would have been shattered by a return visit when I was a boy. It was a quiet place even then; the high-domed clock atop the mental hospital dominated the street and was consulted through back windows from houses from up to a mile away. The clock, too, had a quiet secret etched into the stonework of the pedastal. "Will you look up there at that clock", said Paddy Forristal, seventy years old, straight as a whip, the shine of his boots proclaiming him an ex-Army man, "look up there and tell me when that asylum was opened."

Would I tell the man not to be doting? Didn't clocks tell the time, not the blooming date? But he had soldierly patience, and though a century of sleet and wind had rounded the sharp edges of some long dead stonemason's work, the date was there in the granite. "Em dee triple cee two eyes and a vee," he recited. "Go home now and don't talk to me again till you know what date that is."

That was my introduction to Latin. Paddy Forristal's house is gone; and you, Paddy? And your neighbour with the bad feet who stopped me every day to run across for five Woodbines to put another coating of black-brown nicotine on his thin fingers?

In the past twenty years dozers have shovelled away your environment leaving Blackboy Pike a memory lying somewhere under the rows of grey-dashed two-storeys with aerials on the chimneys and cinerarias in the front windows.

Nevertheless, Mulgrave Street, Kate O'Brien's street, is substantially unchanged, and why not, considering the



"A small cut-stone heraldic device" over Boru House.